

Sam offers a series of criticisms of U.S. policy toward Iran.

**MISUNDERSTANDING AN ANCIENT SUPERPOWER:
PRINCIPLE CRITIQUES OF THE U.S. POLICY TOWARD IRAN**

By Sam Sedaei

After his reelection to the office for a second term, George Bush has strengthened his rhetoric against Iran. While the “E.U. Three”— Germany, France, and Great Britain – continue their talks with Iran to convince the Iranian government to abandon its desire for nuclear technology and uranium enrichment projects, the United States has refused to join the negotiations. Instead, the Bush administration has expressed its intention to promote democracy in that country, repeatedly accused Iran of developing nuclear weapons based on no clear evidence, and threatened to refer Iran to the U.N. Security Council for economic sanctions. Simultaneously, while the Bush administration has verbally supported the people of Iran in their struggle to join the free world and resist the clerical rule, it has stopped short of calling for a regime change and has not taken real effective measures to support the reformist movement. As President Bush’s conviction on Iran’s nuclear ambition shapes his policies, various criticisms have been offered by American politicians and journalists as well as Iranian activists and reformers on the policies of the Bush administration regarding Iran, which shall be discussed.

One of the major criticisms of the policies of the Bush administration with respect to Iran has been offered by an award-winning Op-Ed columnist for The New York Times, Nicolas Kristof. After traveling to Iran for a few weeks to compose a report on the internal changes inside Iran, and most importantly, reactions of Iranians to President Bush’s rhetoric, he drew a few conclusions which are very important for this administration to understand before implementing its policies. In order to understand

Kristof's criticism, it is first imperative to learn the facts he relies upon to shape that criticism.

One of Kristof's first impressions on the attitude of Iranians toward America was overwhelming pro-Americanism among the people. As individuals were asked how they felt about America, most often they responded that they have "very good and positive feelings" about the people of the United States. However, most disapproved the actions of the Bush administration, and justified that feeling by strongly denouncing Mr. Bush labeling Iran part of an "axis of evil" and disrespecting the Iranian civilization. The people in Iran repeatedly told Kristof that they will not have the desire to support President Bush's so-called democracy initiatives in the "greater middle east," if he is going to continue to "bully" the countries in the region to comply with his requests. Kristof's second astute observation was the existence and nature of the reformist movement inside Iran. He recognized the internal reformist resistance which has made tremendous progress in weakening the Iranian government from inside by greatly embracing the ideas of democracy, and most importantly, using western countries and the United States as models for their democratic visions.

Having observed the above condition inside Iran, Kristof criticizes the Bush administration for threatening to use force to destruct Iranian nuclear facilities, or referring Iran to the U.N. Security Council. Even though Kristof acknowledges the importance of concerns over Iran's nuclear program and intentions, he shrewdly warns that the greatest danger is that by maintaining their strong rhetoric against Iran, the Bush administration and other hardliners in the U.S. might end up bolstering and rescuing the hardliners in Iran by creating a sense of patriotism around the Iranian government, and consequently cutting the legs from under the reformers (Kristof 2004a). Kristof believes

that the United States needs to raise proliferation without bolstering the hardliners, by directly and continually communicating with the people of Iran through means such as satellite television. It is only by clarifying to the people of Iran that the target of the United States is the regime and not the Iranian people that, Kristof believes, the United States can have a positive effect in promoting democracy in the region.

Another major and continuous criticism on the policies of the Bush administration has come from the son of the late shah of Iran, Reza Pahlavi. Reza Pahlavi, who has been banned from entering Iran by the clerical regime in Iran, is a leading and vocal advocate of the principles of non-violent movement to promote freedom, democracy, and human rights in Iran. Using democratic movements such as the recent one in Ukraine, or the one led by Mahatma Gandhi in the mid-twentieth century, Pahlavi has been encouraging non-violent and reformist movements from outside Iran since early 1980's.

Given his background and the nature of his efforts to overthrow the clerical rule in Iran, he strongly opposes both the Bush administration's policy as well as the policy of the E.U. three with respect to Iran. During numerous recent interviews, while acknowledging that Afghanistan and Iraq obtained their democracies through foreign military action, Pahlavi has stressed the fundamental differences between Iran and the rest of the countries in the region (Pahlavi 2005a). He underlined that unique to the rest of the countries in the Middle East, Iran is a "political society," and references examples of periods since the rule of Qajar dynasty of 1794 during which Iranians have shown capability to accomplish change through military coups and uprisings, and without foreign military aid. Such principles, he believes, are imperative for the United States and Europeans to understand before deciding on their policies toward Iran, because it would

lead the west to pursue much less militaristic tactics than their previous ones in the region.

Another one of Pahlavi's major criticisms of the Bush administration is directed toward what he calls President Bush's "one-size-fits-all policy." Since George Bush has heightened its negative rhetoric toward Iran, Pahlavi has opposed what he sees as a set of policies and procedures which the Bush administration seems to be following with regards to most countries in the Middle East (Pahlavi 2005c). He stresses that if the policy of the Bush administration is to promote democracy and save the people in the world from the rule of dictators and clerical regimes, that policy needs to be pursued in light of each country's unique history, understanding of their people, tendencies for democracy and democratic movements, and other factors which are shaping the politics inside those countries. Pahlavi criticizes Bush for not truly understanding the democratic and reformist movement inside Iran, which has already brought many political changes to Iranians.

Pahlavi's final major criticism is with respect to both the policy of the Bush administration as well as the Europeans' approach to dealing with Iran's nuclear developments. Pahlavi observes that whether it is the policy of the United States to threaten to strike nuclear sites in Iran if it does not comply, or the policy of the Europeans to negotiate with the clerics ruling Iran, the people of Iran have been taken out of the equation. Pahlavi believes that the most constructive method that could be employed to bring democratic change in Iran and strengthen the already-existing feelings of pro-Americanism among Iranians is to engage in direct dialogue with the people of Iran and provide constant and active international support for the defense of human rights and women's rights inside Iran, and for the reformers to make change for themselves. He

warns that both the American approach of threats as well as the European approach of negotiations with the ruling clerics whom the Iranian people consider to be their oppressors, will only cause anti-western sentiment among the people, which will not have a positive effect for the west or the reformers in Iran, leaving the oppressive government of Iran the sole winner of either policy. Pahlavi states that the people of Iran will welcome international moral support for change much more than the “freedom of a marching American general.”

Another very important criticism of the possibility of a military attack has recently been offered in an article titled “The Human Rights Case Against Attacking Iran,” written by Shirin Ebadi and Hadi Ghaemi. Ebadi, the 2003 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, is the founder of the Center for Defense of Human Rights in Tehran, Iran, and Ghaemi is a researcher for Human Rights Watch.

Ebadi acknowledges that the U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East, and particularly Iran, is claimed to have been designed, among other things, to promote human rights in that region. However, she argues, the possibility of a military strike will precisely have a counter effect to that cause. Ebadi strongly confirms that the situation for human rights inside Iran is far from ideal. However, she reminds foreign observers and policymakers that not only activism for the defense of human rights is not silent inside Iran, but it is now stronger than ever. Whenever journalists and reformers have been arrested for printing materials unapproved by the state, vocal Iranian organizations such as the Center for Defense of Human Rights, the Association of Journalists for Freedom of Press, and the Student Association for Human Rights have pressured the clerics so strongly that it has led to the release of those detained. However Ebadi astutely warns that any threats of military intervention will give the Iranian government a strong excuse to

detain human right defenders and political dissidents by simply labeling them as “enemy’s fifth column” (Ebadi 2005).

Ebadi also criticizes President Bush’s policy for being hypocritical. Having overlooked violations of human rights and women’s rights in allied countries such as Saudi Arabia, it is most logical to believe that the Bush administration is using the idealist image of a defender of human rights to pursue its larger strategic interests. Ebadi believes that respect for human rights is a process which needs to evolve from within a society and as part of a democratic process. She believes that even if an oppressive regime is removed by force, the long-term situation for human rights would only improve through society’s own evolution and enlightenment, which is very well underway. However destroying human lives and causing destruction through military intervention will only interrupt that evolutionary process inside Iran, causing human rights to become one of the first casualties.

As far as her policy prescription is concerned, Ebadi calls for a policy similar to that favored by Reza Pahlavi. She believes that the Bush administration should promote democracy human rights in Iran, not by threats for military attack, but by recognizing the work of reformers and human rights defenders, as well as insisting that Iran follows the international human rights laws and conventions it has signed. A military intervention however would cause the most destructive harm to the goal of the human rights movement.

As the arguments above demonstrate, various parties and individuals have criticized the policy of the Bush administration toward Iran. Even though many of the arguments offered by critics vary in rationale and areas of interest, they all advice the Bush administration to study in a deeper sense the elements of powerful democratic

movement in Iran, engage in a more direct dialogue with the people of Iran and reformers, and continue pressuring the Iranian government to abide by signed treaties and international laws of human rights.

Bibliography

- Ebadi, Shirin, and Ghaemi, Hadi. 2005. "The Human Rights Case Against Attacking Iran." *The Human Rights Watch website*, <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2005/02/09/iran10159.htm>
- Kristof, Nicolas. 2004a. "Interview: Iranian Ayatollah warns of revolution." *The New York Times on the web*. <http://query.nytimes.com/search/query?srcht=s&srchst=m&vendor=&query=%22Nicholas+D.+Kristof%22>
- Kristof, Nicolas. 2004b. "Six Questions for Iran." *The New York Times on the web*. <http://query.nytimes.com/search/query?srcht=s&srchst=m&vendor=&query=%22Nicholas+D.+Kristof%22>
- Pahlavi, Reza. 2005a. "Reza Pahlavi's interview with BBC TODAY (Radio 4)." *Reza Pahlavi's Website*, <http://www.rezapahlavi.org/index.htm>
- Pahlavi, Reza. 2005b. "Reza Pahlavi – Interview with "News and Views" (V.O.A. TV)." *Reza Pahlavi's Website*, <http://www.rezapahlavi.org/index.htm>
- Pahlavi, Reza. 2005c. "Reza Pahlavi's interview with Radio Farda regarding the referendum." *Reza Pahlavi's Website*, <http://www.rezapahlavi.org/index.htm>
- Pahlavi, Reza. 2005d. "Reza Pahlavi – Interview with Radio Israel." *Reza Pahlavi's Website*, <http://www.rezapahlavi.org/index.htm>